

Luke 17:11-19 Ten Lepers

A traditional passage for Thanksgiving is found in Luke 17:11-19 which records how Jesus healed 10 lepers and only one returned to give thanks.

Read Luke 17:11-12 for the setting of this event.

In Jesus' day there was no disease more dreaded than leprosy. It was a disease that affected the nerves in one's body so that one did not feel pain. For example, as a result of not feeling pain one often touched things like a hot pan without feeling it, the result being damage done to the hand. In time fingers became infected so someone with leprosy lost them. Those who have worked in leper colonies tell of the terrible stench that was always present from infected, and therefore, rotting flesh.

Perhaps more serious than the physical implications of leprosy, if anything could be more significant, was the psychological impact that came from being separated from everyone without the disease. Because leprosy is a highly contagious disease, God decreed that one who had it must not interact with others, thus limiting its spread. Read Leviticus 13:45-46.

Having to live outside the camp meant isolation from family and friends. That meant one couldn't touch one's spouse, hug one's kids, shake hands with a neighbor etc.

A leper was condemned to a life of begging and was required whenever he was within viewing distance of a non-leper to cry as loud as he could "**Unclean, Unclean**" so that person would not come near him. He was left alone to die.

There is no record of anyone ever being cured of leprosy apart from an act of God. There were some, apparently, who were thought to have it, but it turned out to be some other skin disease and in time they recovered but when it was leprosy, that was it.

Read Luke 11:12-13.

We are not told why they called out to Jesus. Perhaps they had heard rumors that He had healed other lepers or perhaps they hoped that because He had healed other diseases, He could help them.

As a small side note, because of the nature of leprosy it has often been compared to sin. Man, as a sinner, is literally dying because the wages of sin is just that, death. There is absolutely nothing he can do about it. He has no cure. The only hope he has is the mercy or pity of God who alone can care for his sin problem, which Jesus did on the Cross. Read Ephesians 2:12 which sounds like a leper.

Notice what Jesus did next. He literally did nothing. He did not touch them as He had done to others. He did not speak to them and say, “**be healed.**” He simply said to them according to verse 14, “**Go, show yourselves to the priests.**” Sometimes when we ask God for help, we assume we know how God will or at least should act but God is not limited to the way we think He should act.

Going to the priest was the requirement under Levitical law to be declared free of the disease. Jesus implied in sending them to the priest that the priest would declare them clean but at that point they had no reason other than faith to believe that was true. If they looked at their hands, they were still white with the disease and the fingers were still infected. But Jesus said, “**Go present yourself to the priests**” and so they did. It was truly an act of faith for which they are to be praised.

There is probably nothing as difficult for Christians as asking for God’s help and while not seeing it, still have the faith to believe that in His time and in His way He will provide. The ten lepers had no visible indication that Jesus had done anything, but they headed to the office of the priest.

And Luke tells us in the last half of verse 14, “**And as they went, they were cleansed.**” I wonder if with each step they saw more healing or if all at once they were clean. The verb tense indicates that it was a gradual cleansing. Trust and keep on trusting God to do what He has said He will do.

Read Luke 17:15.

Note that the leper praised “**God in a loud voice.**” I suspect he used a loud voice because that is what he had gotten used to. He had spent time shouting in a loud voice, “unclean” and now he used that same loud voice to praise God for healing. Is our praise of God as loud as our petitions to Him? We need to learn to say thanks as quickly and as loudly as we call “help.”

Think of some of the excuses the 9 could have used for not going back to thank Jesus. What excuses do we use?

Luke made special note that the one who returned was a Samaritan, or as Jesus called him in verse 18, a **foreigner.**” I wonder if he returned precisely because he knew, as a Samaritan, he did not deserve anything. In some ways he was no different than the rest. He was a leper. It really did not matter what his background was, whether he was rich or poor, educated or not, a citizen or an immigrant, one of the in group or one looked down on, he was a leper. We are all sinners, but thankfulness flows most often from those who recognize they do not deserve what they have received.

Incidentally, the willingness of Jesus to heal a Samaritan is a picture of His being willing to offer His salvation to all, including us.

Verses 17 and 18 are truly sad verses. Jesus asked, **“Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?”** I am not sure we understand that unless we can hear the disappointment in His voice. I am sure one of the reasons we do not thank God often enough for all He has done is that we fail to realize just how important it is to Him to hear us praise Him for what He has done and thanks giving is just that, praise. A separate study could be done on the things for which we are to give thanks but we can sum it all up with the admonition of Paul in Ephesians 5:20 **“always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”**

Here is something you would not know if biblical scholars did not point it out. Luke, who was a physician and interested in healing, used three different words to describe what happened in the life of those lepers, and in particular in the life of the one who returned to give thanks.

In verse 14 we read in the NIV, **“they were cleansed”** The actual word that Luke used there is **“healed”** and was used to describe something that was medically repaired as in setting a broken bone. In verse 17 Jesus said, **“Were not all ten cleansed?”** There Jesus used the Greek word that literally meant **“cleansed”** or the *“removal of impurities.”* The Greek word is the one from which we get our English word “catheter” and of course that is designed to remove impurities from our bodies. The last word was used only of the Samaritan who returned to Jesus, Jesus said to him, **“your faith has made you well.”** That word was not a medical term at all but was used to describe when one escaped or was rescued from a dangerous situation. All 10 of the lepers were healed of their physical disease but only to the one who gave thanks do we read Jesus saying, **“You have been rescued.”** That, of course, is what Jesus came to do. The angel declared His name shall be called Jesus because He will save people.

How long is our thank you list? The message of Luke 17, and in fact of all of Scripture, is that giving thanks is not something we are expected to do once a year but every day, in fact often each day. Since every good and perfect gift has come to us from God, He deserves our praise via “thank you.”